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ABSTRACT

Because playwrights are limited to textual elements that an audience can hear and see--dialogue and movement--much of a drama's tension and interest lie in the subtext, the characters' emotions and motives implied but not directly expressed by the text itself. The teacher must help students construct what in a novel the author may have made more overt. Other factors also complicate a reader's response to drama. Dramatic texts are actually pretexts to performance, closer relatives to musical scores than to purely verbal artifacts like novels or poems, and the script is no more the play than a score is the symphony. A question at the heart of teaching dramatic literature is: How does a teacher approach a playtext in a way that examines not only its literary aspects but those significant performative dimensions that create meaning? This paper discusses how teachers can help students bring drama to life; approaches that allow students to explore how actors create meaning in their respective roles; how a playwright's meaning may vary from cast to cast; how the director's guidance affects interpretation; and how the technical effects may shape the final performance. The paper contends that the secret is to read as if watching the play on a personally imagined stage performed for the reader as the primary audience. It suggests two related techniques--studying the text as an actor to explore the role of a particular character, or positioning yourself as the director. The paper analyzes Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman" to illustrate how an "actor" or "director" might approach it. (NKA)

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Teaching Drama: Text and Performance

Although many high school and college literature courses include plays in their curriculum, teachers are sometimes uncertain about approaching these texts, for the study of plays poses genre-specific problems. Students often find that reading drama is more difficult and less pleasurable than reading fiction. How should they respond to a text that lacks regular paragraphs, that provides no authorial voice between the lines of dialogue, no overt transitions? Because playwrights are limited to those elements that an audience can hear and see— dialogue and movement—much of a drama's tension and interest lie in what is known as the subtext, the characters' emotions and motives implied but not directly expressed by the text itself, and the teacher must help students construct what in a novel the author may have made more overt. A comparison between an excerpt from a scene in Henry James' *Washington Square* with the same scene from the play *The Heiress*, based on the novel, illustrates how readers of plays must do the interpretative work that novelists often includes as part of their story. Catherine Sloper is the central character of James' novel, the shy daughter of the wealthy, sardonic Dr. Austin Sloper. She is being courted by Morris Townsend, whom her father accurately perceives as a fortune hunter. When the doctor presses Catherine to promise that she will not marry Townsend, she resists. James describes the scene with a careful account of Catherine's motives:

> The Doctor was silent a moment. "I ask you for a particular reason. I am altering my will."
>
> This reason failed to strike Catherine; and indeed she scarcely understood it. All her feelings were merged in the sense that he was trying to treat her as he had treated her years before. She had suffered from it then; and now all her experience, all her acquired tranquillity and rigidity protested. She had been so humble in her youth that she could now afford to have a little pride, and there was something in this request, and in her father's thinking himself so free to make it, that seemed an injury to her dignity. Poor Catherine's dignity was not aggressive; it never sat in state; but if you pushed far enough you could find it. Her father had pushed very far. "I can't promise," she simply repeated.

Here is the same moment as it appears in the script:

CATHERINE: I won't promise.

DR. SLOPER: Please explain, then!

CATHERINE: I can't explain and won't promise.

DR. SLOPER: Then I must alter my will.

CATHERINE: You should. You should do it immediately.

DR. SLOPER: I will do it when I please.

CATHERINE: That is very wrong of you. You should do it now, while you can.

Other factors also complicate a reader's response to drama. Unlike a poem or novel, whose meaning evolves from an interaction between the text and a solitary reader, the ultimate meaning of a drama lies in collaboration among a group of people: directors, actors, costumers, scene and lighting designers. In fact, dramatic texts—or playtexts, as the genre is frequently referred to—are actually pre-texts to performance, closer relatives to musical scores than to purely verbal artifacts like novels or poems, and the script is no more the play than a score is the symphony. So reading a playtext requires of us a special involvement in the act of reading.

Teachers, then, can find themselves handicapped in presenting playtexts in all their complexity, for they can hardly call up a performance at will. This difficulty leads to a question at the heart of teaching dramatic literature: How does one approach a playtext in a way that examines not only its literary aspects but those significant performative dimensions that create meaning? In this presentation I will discuss how teachers can help students bring a drama to life, approaches that allow students to explore how actors create meaning in their respective roles, how a playtext's meaning may vary from cast to cast, how the director's guidance affects interpretation, and how the technical effects (scenery, lighting, sound, makeup, costuming, camera angles, etc.) may shape the final performance.

The secret is to read as if one were watching the play on a personally imagined stage performed for the reader as the primary audience. Such a reading does not require acting or other theatrical experiences, but it does require using one's imagination. Two related techniques can help students engage their imaginations in this way: they can study the text as an actor and explore the role of a

particular character or they can position themselves as the director, whose main job is to clear a space in which actors can liberate their imaginations. For the teacher, the latter possibility might be the more fruitful, for the director needs to think about all aspects of the performance, including those which exceed the grasp of any individual character, such as sound effects and stage sets. One useful technique for the teacher/director is to consider alternative enactments, weighing a choice between different emphases. One can imagine alternatives for any aspect of a play—should *Hamlet,* for instance, be set and costumed in the Elizabethan period or in the contemporary one (as the recent movie has conceived the play, with Claudius trying to take over a corporation called "Denmark")? How should a line of dialogue be read? Variations in vocal interpretation can modify meaning by as much as 180 degrees, as the following dialogue illustrates. (Handout)

A: Come here.

B: No.

A: I said, come here.

B: All right.

Of course, the interpretation of any dialogue is—unlike this sample—constrained by its context, and to demonstrate how approaching a playtext as director or actor might, I have chosen for analysis Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*—a well-known play often included in the English curriculum of both high school and college classes. Many of the techniques discussed here are based upon the theories of Constantin Stanislavski, a Russian director whose influence evolved in this country into what is commonly referred to as "method acting."

For the sake of clarity, here's a quick review of Miller's most famous play: Willy Loman, aged 63, has been traveling for the same New York company for 36 years, and he is exhausted. Returning late from a profitless sales trip during which he nearly crashed his car, he is greeted by his wife Linda and his two sons, Happy and Biff, both in their early 30s. They are home for a visit. Happy, the younger of the two and a complacent womanizer, holds a dull but secure job. Biff, a football star in his high school days and once his father's pride, now leads an aimless existence that angers and disappoints Willy.

During a restless night in which Willy's memories of happier times past intermingle with a series of arguments and discussions with his wife and sons, Willy promises Linda that he will ask his employer for a desk job that will take him off the road, while Biff plans to negotiate a loan from a former employer to start an independent business. Neither project, however, is realistic. Willy, whose garrulous eccentricity has become an embarrassment to the company, is fired and has to turn to his only friend, Charley, for another handout. Biff is unable to get so much as an interview from his old employer, who runs a sporting goods store and years ago had fired Biff for a petty theft. That evening, at the restaurant where the three men had planned to celebrate, Willy is overwhelmed by the collective bad news and recalls the night when Biff, then a teenager, discovered him with a woman in his hotel room, a trauma which destroyed both their lives. After returning home, Willy is on the edge of a breakdown. He retreats to the backyard and imagines a conversation with his brother Ben, a character the audience knows only through Willy's memories, a man who had gone into the jungle to mine diamonds and come out rich, if we can believe what Willy remembers about him. When Willy returns to the house, Biff tearfully describes his own limitations and begs his father to accept them, to face reality. Touched by Biff's outburst that ends with Biff embracing him and by Linda's reassurance that Biff still loves him, Willy decides to kill himself so that Biff can inherit his life insurance money. The final scene of the play is a requiem at Willy's funeral, following a car crash in which Willy has committed suicide.

As Miller's stage directions make clear, Willy's past and present co-exist within the arena of his own partially transparent house and yard, the place which, after 25 years of mortgage payments, is on the brink of becoming the pathetic monument to his life's achievements. Scene changes from past to present in the original production were signified by shifts in lighting to dramatize the subjectivity of the play, which takes place largely inside Willy's head during his final 24 hours of life. (The working title of the play was, in fact, "The Inside of His Head.") In that production, the memory scenes were indicated by the shadows of tree branches on the stage, recalling a past when Willy's house in Brooklyn was surrounded by peaceful countryside instead of the high-rise apartments that now loom over it. A more recent production used a revolving stage to indicate shifts in time, producing the effect of time slipping by and suggesting what the text makes explicit—that Willy's working years are over, that he is being cast off like the rind of

a fruit, a realization that Willy expresses to his boss in a poignant line: "You can't eat the orange and throw the peel away—a man is not a piece of fruit!"

At the beginning of the rehearsal period of any play, the cast and director need to identify what Stanislavski calls the given circumstances of the play: the time and place of the action, the conditions of life, the setting, the props, lighting, sound effects—all that the actors encounter when they create their roles. Students need to do the same. *Salesman,* for example, moves back and forth between two periods separated by about twenty years, the years of the boys' high school days and their present. Willy describes his car of the former period, when the boys were in high school, as a 1928 Chevy with 80,000 miles, which puts the action of the memory sequences around 1929 or 1930. Because the boys are now in their thirties, the scenes unfolding in Willy's present are set in the years immediately following WWII. The students can comb the script for other clues, such as Willy's boss's new "wire recorder"— the ancestor of our own tape players. How does the time period affect the characters' outlook on life? Why, for example, is Linda so blindly loyal to her husband? Miller says of her that "she has developed an iron repression of her exceptions to Willy's behavior—she more than loves him, she admires him, as though his mercurial nature, his temper, his massive dreams and little cruelties, serve only as sharp reminders of the turbulent longings within him, longings which she shares but lacks the temperament to utter and follow to their end." What do we make of this within the given circumstances of the play? Is Linda a weak character, hostage to her husband's pretensions, or a strong one, a supportive wife who stands by her man, regardless of the price she must pay—in this case, her relationship with her oldest son.

Students can also consider the scenic details. What meaning, for example, resides in Miller's lyrical description of the setting: "Before us is the Salesman's house. We are aware of towering, angular shapes behind it, surrounding it on all sides. Only the blue light of the sky falls upon the house and forestage; the surrounding area shows an angry flow of orange. As more light appears, we see a solid vault of apartment houses around the small, fragile-seeming home. An air of the dream clings to the place, a dream rising out of reality. The kitchen at center seems actual enough, for there is a kitchen table with three chairs, and a refrigerator. But no other fixtures are seen." Why?

And why did Miller choose to introduce various strains of music when Willy's memories intrude upon his present? What does the music contribute to meaning? Some of the music is specific to the entrace of certain of the characters, Ben, for instance. What music can students suggest that might be appropriate?

Students can also decide upon what Stanislavski labeled the "super-objective" for one or more characters, what they want more than anything else. This should be phrased as an action verb in the infinitive: to – what? In Willy's case, they might decide that he wants to "succeed" in the business world. However, this objective is complicated by the two role models he holds as ideals. One is a salesman named Dave Singleman, who has drummed merchandise in 31 states. Willy tells us that when he died at age 84, hundreds of buyers and salesmen came to pay their respects at his funeral. Singleman was not only liked, he was—in Willy's language--well-liked, and Willy longs to emulate him. Willy's other model is his older brother Ben. In an early memory scene, Ben comes to visit before his departure for a new money-making adventure and stages a fight with Biff, pinning him suddenly on the ground with the point of his umbrella. His advice to Biff: "Never fight fair with a stranger." As this scene illustrates, Ben is savagely competitive, determined to win at all costs. He does not care about being "well-liked." So Willy is caught between two mutually exclusive opposites, and at his father's funeral, Biff is on target when he says, "The man didn't know who he was."

In analyzing scenes, students can decide what the objectives are for a character in any given scene and decide how the objective for that scene links to the character's super-objective. The character must—what? What strategy will the character enact to achieve that objective? This should be phrased as process, as an -ing verb, something that's happening right now. For example, in an early memory scene, Willy returns from a road trip on the eve of Biff's big football game. Biff, captain of the team, promises a touchdown for Willy, although his brother reminds him that he is supposed to pass. After his boys' exit, Willy tells Linda that he sold "thousands and thousands" during his trip, but that he had to come for the game. The scene is captured in the following dialogue:

LINDA: Did you sell anything?

WILLY: I did five hundred gross in Providence and seven hundred gross in Boston.

LINDA: No! Wait a minute, I've got a pencil. (*She pulls pencil and paper out of her apron pocket.*) That makes your commission . . . Two hundred—my God! Two hundred and twelve dollars!

WILLY: Well, I didn't figure it yet, but . . .

LINDA: How much did you do?

WILLY: Well, I—I did—about a hundred and eighty gross in Providence. Well, no—it came to—roughly two hundred gross on the whole trip.

LINDA: (*Without hesitation*) Two hundred gross. That's . . . (*She figures.*)

WILLY: The trouble was that three of the stores were half closed for inventory in Boston. Otherwise I woulda broke records.

LINDA: Well, it makes seventy dollars and some pennies. That's very good.

WILLY: What do we owe?

Willy and Linda discuss the bills that are coming due—payments on the refrigerator, washing machine, vacuum cleaner, a repair bill for the roof, and another to fix the carburetor of the car—a hundred and twenty dollars by the fifteenth of the month. Willy is distraught at the total:

WILLY: A hundred and twenty dollars! My God, if business don't pick up I don't know what I'm gonna do!

LINDA: Well, next week you'll do better.

WILLY: Oh, I'll knock 'em dead next week. I'll go to Hartford. I'm very well liked in Hartford. You know, the trouble is, Linda, people don't seem to take to me.

LINDA: Oh, don't be foolish.

WILLY: I know it when I walk in. They seem to laugh at me.

LINDA: Why? Why would they laugh at you? Don't talk that way, Willy.

WILLY: I don't know the reason for it, but they just pass me by. I'm not noticed.

One way to approach the character's objective in any given scene is to examine the subtext and paraphrase it to reveal the unarticulated emotions beneath the text. What do you take Willy to be saying when he says, "Oh, I'll knock 'em dead next week. I'll go to Hartfodd. I'm very well liked in Hartford. You know, the trouble is, Linda, people don't seem to take to me." There's an obvious contradiction within this speech (and Willy contradicts himself often throughout the play, an indication of his troubled state of mind). What do you make of this speech or of the entire scene? What is Willy's objective in it? He must—what? And what is he doing to achieve that objective? That is, what strategy does he employ to accomplish his aim? (Discussion)

In analyzing a character, we can also look at the obstacles to his achieving his super-objective, for character is the site of conflict. Willy reveals part of his problem here. He hasn't earned the respect of those he deals with. As he says a few speeches later, he talks too much; others make fun of him behind his back. And in his pursuit of success, he has developed the wrong values: he lies, has taught his sons to lie and cheat, he has cheated on his wife. Part of his problem can be traced to a childhood trauma, when his father left the family to seek his fortune in Alaska. Willy confesses to Ben that he's always felt "sort of temporary" about himself. Unsure of himself, he fails to command respect from others and resorts to boastful, off-putting behavior that defeats the very objectives that he strives for. His internal conflicts must be played out through external actions, and students can discuss (or even demonstrate in a particular scene) how the actor playing Willy can convey those conflicts to an audience.

Another approach to exploring a character is to examine the text itself, asking the following questions:

- What does the character say about himself in a play?
- What does he say about the other people in the play?
- What do other people say about him?
- What are the objective facts about the character?

Again using Willy as an example, here are a few things revealed in the opening beat of the text, a beat being a segment of the playtext with the same actors on stage, in this case Willy and Linda: (the entrance or exit of actors signal a new beat)

In the first beat, Willy says about himself:

> I'm tired to the death.
>
> I suddenly couldn't drive any more.
>
> These goddam arch supports are killing me.
>
> I have such thoughts, I have such strange thoughts.
>
> They [his company] don't need me in New York. I'm the New England man. I'm vital in New England.
>
> Why am I always being contradicted?

This is what he says about others:

> If old man Wagner [his former boss] was alive I'd been in charge of New York now! That man was a prince, he was a masterful man. But that boy of his, Howard, he don't appreciate.
>
> Some people—some people accomplish something.
>
> There's such an undercurrent in him [Biff]. He became a moody man. Did he apologize when I left this morning?
>
> In the beginning when he [Biff] was young, I thought, well, a young man, it's good for him to tramp around, take a lot of different jobs. But it's more than ten years now and he has yet to make thirty-five dollars a week.
>
> The trouble is, he's lazy, goddammit! Biff is a lazy bum!
>
> Biff Loman is lost. In the greatest country in the world a young man with such—personal attractiveness, gets lost. And such a hard worker. There's one thing about Biff—he's not lazy.
>
> You're my foundation and support, Linda.

In this same beat, Linda says about Willy:

> You look terrible.
>
> You never went for your new glasses.
>
> You'll just have to take a rest, Willy, you can't continue this way.
>
> Your mind is overactive, dear, and the mind is what counts.
>
> You're sixty years old. They can't expect you to keep traveling every week.
>
> You're too accommodating, dear.
>
> You shouldn't have criticized Biff, Willy, especially after he just got off the train. You mustn't lose your temper with him.
>
> You've got too much on the ball to worry about.

And here are the objective facts about Willy revealed in the first few pages:

> He is past sixty years of age, dressed quietly. He has come home without completing his trip. He is a salesman. His feet hurt. He contradicts himself. He is exhausted. He is confused. He remembers the past with great nostalgia. He has lost control of his car on the road. New England is his territory.

Taken together, the information gathered in this dialogue reveals much about Willy's character and can lead to lively discussions not only about Willy but about the other characters and their relationships with him.

Another way to engage a reader is to imagine or discover a secret that each of the characters harbors. In some instances, the secret is revealed in the text. Willy, for example, brims with secrets—his affair on the road, his humiliation when Biff discovers him, his sense of inadequacy—but students might want to invent another secret that provides a clue to Willy's character. Perhaps early in his career a buyer said or did something that destroyed much of his self-esteem, perhaps he has been embezzling a little money. As for Linda, we don't get to know her as well, and critics have noted that she is less developed than Willy and his sons. What is Linda's secret? Perhaps she knows of Willy's affair, having discovered evidence of it among his things. Perhaps she has received phone calls from Willy's boss when he is late coming off the road and covers for him by lying. Biff reveals his secret at the end of the play: All those months when he was out of contact with his family, he was in jail for stealing a suit. Secrets can cause conflicts among characters that erupt in behavior nearly inexplicable to those who remain innocent of the secret, but they can also endow a character with mystique and depth. In discussing or inventing a character's secret, one can ask: what is the motive? Who is excluded from knowing the secret? Who is protected? Who is—knowingly or unknowingly—damaged?

Viewing and comparing two performances of the identical playtext is another way to explore the performative aspects of a drama, and I've prepared a videotape of two different casts performing a scene that includes the dialogue we examined earlier. The first scene, starring Dustin Hoffman as Willy, was filmed in the late '80s; the second was taped during a live Broadway performance two years ago with a cast that starred Brian Donnehy as Willy. (Videotape and discussion)

A good playwright, as Virginia Woolf said of Jane Austin, "stimulates us to supply what is not there." But for most students, inexperienced at reading drama and unable to attend a performance of the playtext under study, "what is not there" may prove elusive. However, students can learn that such a text is not a sketchy, inferior variation of fiction but a narrative that is engaging and satisfying on its own terms. Helping readers to account for a playtext's central interest and the complexities of its characters coaxes "what is not there" from where it has always lurked—in the reader's imagination.